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Vamping the Archive: Approaching Aesthetics in Global Media

Rayya El Zein
University of Pennsylvania

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Vamping the Archive: Approaching Aesthetics in Global Media

Description
CARGC Paper 8, “Vamping the Archive: Approaching Aesthetics in Global Media,” by CARGC Postdoctoral Fellow, Rayya El Zein, is based on El Zein’s CARGC Colloquium and draws its inspiration from Metro al-Madina’s Hishik Bishik Show in Beirut. CARGC Paper 8 weaves assessments of local and regional contexts, aesthetic and performance theory, thick description, participant observation, and interview to develop an approach to aesthetics in cultural production from the vantage of global media studies that she calls “vamping the archive.”

Disciplines
Communication

Comments
CARGC Paper 8

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I am very proud to share CARGC Paper 8, “Vamping the Archive: Approaching Aesthetics in Global Media,” by Rayya El Zein, a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication. Rayya wrote a first version of this paper, presented it to the Annenberg community, and revised it for publication, all while in residence at CARGC.

As we conclude our fifth year, we at CARGC are happy to announce that we have recruited four outstanding new postdoctoral fellows, bringing the total number of postdocs in AY 2018-2019 to six. They will be working with CARGC Doctoral, Undergraduate, and Faculty Fellows on individual and collaborative research projects. Of particular note is the inaugural edition of South by Southeast: the CARGC Fellows Biennial Conference, which will be held in March 2019. You can read more about our established and new initiatives in CARGC@5, a detailed report about our first five years, published in summer 2018.

CARGC Paper 8 constitutes an important step into an area that has unfortunately not received adequate attention in global media and communication studies to date: aesthetics. This contribution places this paper at the intersection of two CARGC Research Groups. The first, History and Theory in Global Media Studies, is dedicated to articulating our subfield with areas of inquiry that have not been fully explored and that we feel are important for the development of global media studies. Aesthetics and affect are two such areas. In the second research group, Geopolitics and the Popular, we focus on the myriad ways in which popular culture and politics mesh and amplify each other.

I can think of no one better suited to making CARGC’s first foray into research on aesthetics than Dr. Rayya El Zein, whose training is in theatre and performance studies, and whose focus at CARGC is Arab music performance at the intersection of aesthetics, politics, and identity.

By focusing on key Arab performances, “Vamping the Archive: Approaching Aesthetics in Global Media,” tackles important, long-standing issues: the tension between art and revolution, the porous boundary between political visibility and the fetishization of protest, and the constantly lurking forces of appropriation and cooptation that threaten politically imbued cultural production. In doing so, Dr. El Zein explores the conditions under which aesthetic innovation in cultural production succeeds, or fails, as political provocation.

Tracing the transnational and transhistorical circulation of a cultural form like Hishik Bishik Show, El Zein develops “vamping the archive” as a theoretically-inflected methodological approach to investigating connections between aesthetics
and politics in global media studies. Though developed to understand Arab popular culture, this approach fueled by a rejection of “objective” representation, is applicable broadly.

I urge you to read CARGC Paper 8, to engage with Dr. El Zein, and to join the fray of debate about theoretical developments in global media studies. While you are at it, please check out our other CARGC Papers, CARGC Briefs, and special issues of journal articles co-published by CARGC Press. If you like what you read, please spread the word about us, and help us fulfill our mission in nurturing emerging scholars worldwide.

Marwan M. Kraidy
Professor of Communication
The Anthony Shadid Chair in Global Media, Politics & Culture
Director, Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication (CARGC)
2016 Andrew Carnegie Fellow
@MKraidy
Heritage, tradition, the old frames of mind, these are dead and gone. It’s time to say good-bye. We have to discover our own path towards the future.

-So you intend your own musical revolution, following the Arab uprisings?

Yes, we hope so.

Thus began a television interview with the Lebanese band a-Rahel al-Kabeer [The Great Departed] in late 2014. The indie band’s work primarily consists of contemporary arrangements of classics from the so-called tarab repertoire, the classical archive of twentieth-century Arabic song. For some time, the band had attracted the attention of the local media, who celebrated the artists as model youth, revamping and revitalizing Arab musical heritage for young and old audiences alike. But in 2014, the indie band also attracted international media attention for its musical satires of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, self-proclaimed leader of the misnamed “Islamic State.” In 2014 and 2015, The New York Times, The Guardian, and The Economist all celebrated the band’s young musicians for fighting back against the barbarism of IS with musical satire.

As part of the new attention the group was receiving around the satires, journalist Deema Wannous opened a TV interview with the band on the Dubai-based, Arabic-language online news network OrientNews with a question directed at the band’s chief lyricist, Khaled Sobeih. She asked him about the band’s name - what or who is “the great departed” to which the band’s name refers? Sobeih answered with the passage quoted above: “culture, tradition, heritage: these are dead and gone, ‘departed.’” In this statement, Sobeih positioned the band as heralding a new age of cultural invention and revolution. But Wannous doesn’t seem convinced. In 2014, unable to conceal skepticism after nearly four years of regular declarations of revolution across the Arab world, the journalist almost rolls her eyes at the young artist’s confident declaration that the band intends a musical revolution. She repeats back his final answer, inshallah [we hope so, god willing], with a tone that implies “really?” Then, without allowing him to respond, she mm-hmms and changes the subject, addressing personal questions to the band’s lead vocalist, Sandy Chamoun.

An initial reading of the beginning of this interview might focus on Sobeih’s declaration of revolution and cultural eclipse. Indeed, narrations of break, rupture, resistance, and revolt largely dominate discussions of the politics of cultural production coming from the Arab-
majority Middle East. The resounding soundbite-ness of Sobeih’s declaration of revolution, and indeed the eagerness with which the artist articulates it himself (are his band mates itching in their chairs as they listen to his answer?) demonstrates the dominance of this framework. It is a good example of the wide permeation of the tendency US anthropologist Jessica Winegar has identified around the work of Egyptian artists: namely, that they are “judged through hierarchies of value that emphasize the ‘shock of the new’ and a break with ‘tradition.’” This political expectation codes both contemporary art and cultural heritage in political ways: the former is aestheticized and valued as modern, progressive, independent, and legible; the latter as traditional and needing translation, expertise, or revival. This expectation for an aesthetic of rupture in artistic production is, of course, quite different from both debates in and criticism of Marxist aesthetics about the necessity of art to perform a revolutionary role. Indeed, it is precisely the richness with which the urgency of the aesthetic and the political have been debated in the service of revolutionary change in the last century that the current valuation of politics and aesthetics in cultural production across the Arab world appears especially lackluster. What if the moment that drew us into the initial exchange between the journalist and the musicians in the interview above was not the declaration of revolution but the skepticism that followed it? What could fatigue with the declaration of revolution tell us about emergent structures of feeling lacing together artists and their audiences?

In many ways, this CARGC Paper started with this near misfire between artist and interviewer. The artist, confident in the resonance of his claim, articulates political value by announcing the death of the culture, tradition, and the past. The journalist, skeptical, and knowing perhaps that she reflects the viewer’s fatigue with such narratives, searches for other articulations. She blinks at him, really? sighs, and changes the subject. Blink, sigh, move on. The sound of this has been playing on repeat – Really? Mmmm-hmm. Really? Mmm-hmm – tugging at me. What happens when the declaration of revolution meets with skepticism or fails to arouse? How else to frame the political provocations of aesthetic innovation in art and cultural production?

It is in the context of the years following the millennial Arab uprisings that the young interviewer relays skeptical fatigue to her musician guest. The exhilaration of the protest occupations of city squares that came to be known as the Arab Spring accelerated in late 2010 and early 2011 with the ousting of the Tunisian and Egyptian presidents. The 2011 abdications of the Tunisian, Egyptian, and Libyan leaders and the cultures of protest that sustained them seemed an exciting portend of an era of needed political and social change. However, relatively quick on the heels of these historical transformations came the devastating violence of counterrevolution in city after Arab city. The years 2013 and 2014 saw the tense lead-up to civil war and then humanitarian disaster exacerbated by a Saudi-led aerial bombing campaign in Yemen; the indiscriminate use of chemical weapons on civilians in Syria; a military coup d’état in Egypt; a renewed, devastating attack on the Gaza Strip in occupied Palestine; a refugee crisis in Jordan, Lebanon, and Libya; and the rise of the spectacularized Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. By late
2017, the intensification of violence and human and social disrepair across the region led the Palestinian-American historian Rashid Khalidi to describe the state of the Arab world as one “in absolute agony.”

In political and human contexts such as these, to analyze the political impact of art or cultural production can seem like an exercise in futility. At a minimum, it is to find the celebratory narratives about creative expression in protest increasingly out of joint. The chutzpah of satire in the face of barbarism can only sustain a brave sense of humanity for so long. Immersed in accounts of torture, the indiscriminate use of chemical weapons, and coordinated starvation, the defiant wit of protest chants or signs loses its edge. It seems all but impossible to be excited by the call for “revolution” – despite the continued desire and need for political change. Indeed, we can see in retrospect how attention to the aesthetics of protest during the years of the uprisings worked to produce a fetish of aesthetic form. Still, the failures of the Syrian, Egyptian, Yemeni, and Libyan uprisings make urgent the need for critical attention to what aspects of the protest movements were celebrated and how.

This CARGC Paper proceeds from the space opened up by the falling flat of the call for revolution. The journalist’s skeptical mmhmm points to the need to consider political possibilities illuminated by aesthetic innovation other than rupture and revolt. In what follows, I offer a deep analysis of aesthetics in one piece of popular musical theatre in the Lebanese capital Beirut, an Arab city that largely did not host the kinds of protests seen in other major cities and capitals across the region in 2010-2013. In assessing the popularity of a singular musical revue performance, I offer a reading of political aesthetics that is not rooted in abstract declarations of rupture. Rather, the political potency of a piece of musical theatre playing during these politically fraught years illuminates negotiations of nostalgia, the desire for escape, anxiety over the representation of culture, the political textures of the popular, and the citational theatricality of live performance. Elaborating political aesthetics by weaving assessments of local and regional contexts, aesthetic and performance theory, thick description, participant observation, and interview I work to develop an approach to aesthetics in cultural production from the vantage of global media studies that I call here *vamping the archive.*

* * *

In the same venue where *The Great Departed* first performed but with a different cast of talent, *Hishik Bishik Show* premiered in 2013 and still runs today. It is a live musical revue featuring a selection of popular Egyptian songs from the 1920s-1970s. Borrowing its title from an Arabic colloquial phrase that can mean belly dance, a nighttime flirtation, or any figurative loosening of moral fabric, the cabaret show has captured audiences at home and abroad. Several months after the March premiere when I first spoke with him, the artistic director of Metro al-Medina and the director of *Hishik Bishik Show,* Hisham Jaber, estimated that 4,000 people had seen
the piece and that its run would not last past September 2013. However, since that September, it has continued to play several times a month in Beirut and has toured to Europe, Tunisia, and Egypt, putting its audiences comfortably in the tens of thousands. For a theatre with a seating capacity of under two hundred, Hishik Bishik Show’s reach, duration, and continued appeal presents a considerable success story not only within the political economy of independent music and performance in Lebanon, but across the region, arguably competing with exposure of successful, independent live performance in Europe and the US as well.

The songs featuring in Hishik Bishik’s revue are taken from a popular repertoire of music disseminated through and made popular by mid-twentieth-century Egyptian cinema. The reach of this archive of cultural production into the Arab imagination was buttressed by the influence of then Egyptian president Gamal Abd-al Nasser’s popular political platform of pan-Arabism. The Lebanese tour-de-force performance reviving this archival material flirts with politics, engaging ideas about Egypt as the January 25, 2011 revolution in that country moved from imaginative spark to military coup. Without delivering a pronouncement about what could or should happen or how audiences should feel about current events, Hishik Bishik Show points to the shadow of a specific idea of Arab modernity, one disseminated through and associated with the expansive Egyptian cultural industry of the twentieth century. In pointing towards this idea of Arab modernity, and with it a certain framework of pan-Arab belonging and identity, the singers and dancers also poke it, layering citation upon it. In doing so, over the years, Hishik Bishik Show has evoked audience reactions ranging from wistfulness, enthusiasm, and nostalgia, to panic, suspicion, and paranoia. For Lebanese and Tunisian audiences, the revival tapped into a kind of nostalgia for an Arab yesteryear, imagined as far from the division and violence of the present day. For Egyptian audiences, on the other hand, it was a pretentious Lebanese provocation, threatening the sovereignty of Egyptian culture and politics by belittling (even satirizing?) the visual and sonic markers of the golden years of twentieth-century Egyptian cultural production and the music and film industry which beamed them to audiences across the region. Where Hishik Bishik has been well-received, it has been well-liked. Where it has been ill-received, it has provoked a public debate in panicked tones about the state and status of Egyptian culture. Deliberately positioning itself between revival, satire, parody, nostalgia, and the call for change, Hishik Bishik Show navigates post-revolutionary affect in the Arab world in telling ways. The success of the show, the range of emotional responses it has been able to generate, and its articulate ambivalence about history, parody, identity, and belonging make it an ideal case for the study of the cultural mediation of politics in in the contemporary Arab world.

All too aware of skepticism about the declaration of revolution, CARGC Paper 8 proposes instead to linger in the delight and confusion offered by Hishik Bishik Show. What generates affective excess in this performance – to the delight of some and the consternation of others? Does the live revival of a popular musical archive perform nostalgia, irreverence, or parody? Does it evoke belonging, community, or insult? To answer these questions and others, in what follows, I pursue an analysis of the musical cabaret Hishik Bishik Show through a discussion
of political aesthetics of cultural production in Arabic that eschews the imperative of rupture or break and works to complicate an affective analysis of how parody might function. This approach offers several things for the study of aesthetics from the vantage of global media studies.

1) In order to understand how the aesthetics of revival in a globalized performance form like a live cabaret mediate political expectations and offer cultural critique, I first contextualize responses of delight and disgust among different audiences that nonetheless share the cultural referents being revived. In so doing, in this CARGC Paper, I consider how the primary site of my research in Beirut may be illuminated by intra-regional dynamics. Attentive to the specific dynamics of the Beirut street in which the theatre finds itself, as well as the regional context from which it also draws meaning and in which it circulates, I elaborate the contexts of the contrasting social aesthetics that allow the performance to act as an important barometer of political feeling over the past several years. In order to understand how and where the performance intervenes, I consider audience reactions in a range of locales already in conversation with each other, juxtaposing audiences in Beirut with audiences in Tunis and Alexandria. I thus disrupt the impetus to make a “local” context speak to an “international” one by connecting regional reference points, around which affective excess resonates. Unlike a reading of rupture or revolution that assumes homogeneous interpretations of cultural production, since the reading I offer is based on an acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of audiences even within a specific region, my approach to aesthetic innovation necessarily foregrounds the diverse political polysemy of cultural referents. Thus, I work to make room for nuance and complication in analysis of the mediation of culture – even for readers not necessarily familiar with the cultural and historical contexts and physical locales to which I refer.

2) At the same time, I approach the aesthetics of revival in this piece of live performance by highlighting what makes it aesthetically distinct from other mediated turns to the archive in this region. In addition to an intra-regional assessment then, in what follows I have foregrounded an intermedial scope – drawing the significance of the aesthetic innovation I locate from how it diverges from tactics and affects produced by overlapping genres. The particular citation upon the musical archive that the live cabaret Hishik Bishik Show is able to provide (and thus the affective excess it produces) is distinct from the citation upon the archive offered by millennial Arabic reality television or music video clips, twentieth-century film, or contemporary Beiruti DJ culture, among others. When we consider the strategies in this live performance in relation to other attempted mediations of similar archives, what emerges is a layered navigation of both what constitutes “the popular” in popular culture in Arabic and a textured terrain for the circulation of nostalgia in the post-uprisings landscape. This helps to unpack a range of ways to consume nostalgia in popular culture from pop to kitsch to camp that is both familiar to the circulation of cabaret performance...
worldwide and particular to the contemporary Arab world. CARGC Paper 8 argues for an understanding of politics and aesthetics built on a comparative view not just of similar but distinct audiences, but also of similar but distinct mediatizations of the same musical archive, recognizing the range of media practices with which both producers and consumers are familiar. This allows us to see a range of affective responses and aesthetic strategies that may also be understood as satirical citations and parodic inventions.

3) Finally, in terms of research positionality, the theatricality of the put-on cabaret urges us to recognize ourselves as audiences. This facilitates a reflection on the production of power in which we participate as consumers and producers of identity and belonging. The ways in which Hishik Bishik Show mediates and theatricalizes revival toys with the aestheticization of cuteness, charm, and seduction.

To recognize how this works requires an acknowledgement of the viewer as interpolated by this act. As both audience and researcher, I have thus refused a position of exteriority to this research. Allowing myself permission to linger in the delight or anxiety the performance offers to its audiences has meant foregrounding my own specific subjective experiences of both viewer and researcher. Vamping the archive emerges in this paper as an affected approach to trying on modes of analysis and layering citation in order to push a theoretical discussion of both the political and the aesthetic.

In 2013, near the beginning of the political dawn of dread invoked above, the Metro al-Madina theatre on Hamra Street in Beirut premiered an original musical cabaret. The street on which it opened, the main thoroughfare of the eponymous West Beirut neighborhood, has been a constantly evolving hub of intellectual, commercial, and political exchange in the Lebanese capital. In the years since the Syrian uprising began, Hamra Street has become an especially conspicuous indicator, in downtown Beirut, of the Lebanese absorption of Syrian businesses, clientele, and the dispossessed, which have together contributed to only the most recent transformation of the boulevard as regards both affect and demographic makeup. As counterrevolution set in across the region, what can the strong emotional responses provoked by Hishik Bishik Show tell us about emergent structures of feeling in the theatre, in Hamra, and beyond? What might an analysis of the aesthetics developed in this piece reveal about latent political feelings in the context of the fatigue with claims to revolution revealed in the televised exchange with which I began? What can attention to the affect produced by specific kinds of theatricality in the turn to revival tell us about the workings of power? I approach these questions through thick description of the performances themselves, coupled with informal interviews and participant observation with audiences and performers in Beirut conducted since 2014. News coverage and critical commentary of performances in other cities, and assessment of secondary sources round out my discussion that is rooted in the experience of being a member of the audience in the underground theatre on Hamra Street.
AFFECT AND SOCIAL AESTHETICS

Every epoch dreams its successor.
WALTER BENJAMIN

Every epoch dreams it has been destroyed by catastrophe.
THEODOR ADORNO

Hishik Bishik Show is an ensemble piece featuring nine musicians, singers, and dancers. The orchestra members are on stage and dressed in costumes evoking early-1900s Egyptian military officers (fake moustaches and the red, cylindrical, felt tarbush hat popularized by early twentieth-century Ottoman fashion across the Arab world). They, along with one clown, are seated stage right for the entire performance, while the chorus shift personas and costumes according to scene stage left. A dozen whimsical scenes transport the audience from a drunken corner of a cabaret bar in 1920s Egypt – replete with boas, sequins, absinth, and cocaine – to a large, peasant wedding, with belly dancing and ululations, to a trance-like meditation. Meanwhile, in the darkened house, waiters and waitresses serve drinks and snacks throughout the performance – like a real, working cabaret.

Positive reception to the Hishik Bishik Show in Lebanon and Tunisia centered on the feel-good wash of nostalgia the performance is able to evoke. Audiences at the Hishik Bishik Show in Beirut are often multi-generational. Importantly, different generations register and respond to different moments in the performance and this seems to add to, not detract from it. For example, my parents recognize a much wider range of the musical archive into which the piece taps than I do. Their memories in some cases hearken the original radio, television, or films of live performances of these songs – dating to their childhood, teenage years and twenties in Beirut before and during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990). While some of the pieces performed in Hishik Bishik Show also hearken my own childhood, it is an experience of listening mediated otherwise – namely, CD selections my parents made for lazy weekends at home in the suburban US. Nonetheless, the wash of nostalgia seems to reach all of us, despite the fact of the obvious difference in the literal memories the live revival is able to evoke. My parents are often taken by a kind of wistfulness after the performance, as if they had just gone through family photo albums. My own reactions have been less wistful than excited, encouraging cousins of my own generation and extended family to attend. This excitement, mirrored by others, is often not easily reflected in simple descriptions of what one sees on stage, culminating in “you just have to see it.” What is the appeal in this kind of revival for the audiences enticed and seduced by the show?

In discussing the construction of memory in and by the Broadway musical, US theatre historian Rebecca Ann Rugg writes, “Nostalgia is the prime dramaturgical mode of musical theater.” She goes on to identify two types of nostalgia – personal and cultural. Personal nostalgia, she argues, encourages difference as each spectator accesses nostalgia through her own individual
memories of exposure to the original source material the musical reenacts. Rugg’s example of this is the Disney musical, where audiences are invited to view a piece of theatre, a film, or a book, that they were exposed to as children, as adults. Personal nostalgia, she writes, is “the thrill of seeing live what was once on celluloid.” Cultural nostalgia, on the other hand, as in the Broadway hits Show Boat and Oklahoma! rely on simplified and whitewashed versions of a shared past and in so doing, “encourage the fantasy of similarity.” In other words, the musical conjures a historical vision of a homogenous people, consumed by a homogenous public.

For Lebanese audiences, both kinds of nostalgia seem to operate in Hishik Bishik Show. The music is familiar to audiences, either from watching the films as they debuted or from listening with parents and grandparents. So, a kind of personal nostalgia generates a pleasurable sense of comfort in watching Hishik Bishik Show. But it would be amiss to ignore that a palpable cultural nostalgia also touches audiences watching this piece. Moreover, for the Lebanese audience – local and diasporic – the capacity of this nostalgia seems to be rooted in its gesture towards a shared Arab cultural history, not necessarily a particular caricature of the Egyptian musicians it evokes. (My Lebanese interlocutors rarely mentioned Egypt in its particularity as a response to watching the show.) This archive of popular music made in Egypt was less a literal referent and more a placeholder for a certain kind of Arab belonging across generations. In other words, this evocation of belonging continues to be compelling at a time when the dissolution of anything resembling Nasser’s pan-Arabism is complete. That is, the evocation of a different, shared musical culture and past allowed Lebanese audiences some respite from the fractious, sectarian political context that absorbs everyday life. By nature of the history of the Egyptian cultural industries in the region, popular culture made in and disseminated from Egypt in the mid-twentieth century could afford affinity among Lebanese, Syrian, Palestinian middle and upper classes living and consuming in downtown Beirut.

In Tunisia, showing as part of the Hammamet Festival in 2016, the effect and draw of nostalgia provided by the Hishik Bishik Show was also pronounced. Like the Lebanese one, the Tunisian public was largely celebratory. In an interview following the performance in Tunisia, the central dancer in Hishik Bishik, Randa Makhoul, stated, “we knew this [the Tunisian] audience would enjoy it, but we didn’t anticipate they would appreciate the humor this much.” Adding in English, “It was overwhelming.” One write-up of the show declared:

It’s a spectacle where nostalgia takes center stage, since it is the Golden Age of Beirut, a capital as glorious as Cairo and Alexandria. We go to see Hishik Bishik Show to have fun and forget the rest. This concert invites you to relive the artistic richness of the golden Age of Cairo, resuscitated by an excellent Lebanese ensemble. It is a mix of culture and fun. A place where it does one good to listen to light songs, watch dance, and remember the good, old days.

In press like this, audiences are assured of the delight waiting in the presentation of material remembered from childhood and youth, and the evocation of a seemingly more carefree era than the political reality audiences face today. This, the Tunisian audience seems to share with
the Lebanese one. Specifically, however, the Tunisian audience is enticed here by a fascinating slide of “golden ages,” approximating Lebanese and Egyptian entertainment/ers to each other (“the golden age of Cairo, resuscitated by Lebanese”) and at the same time distancing both as a kind of flighty Other to Tunisia. 23

Moreover, while reception to the piece in Beirut and Tunis has been largely celebratory, the presentation in 2015 of Hishik Bishik Show in Alexandria, Egypt in that city’s opera house was controversial. As the Lebanese literary scholar Zeina Halabi has recently noted, this anxiety neared hysteria as Egyptian media commentators, critics, and audience members flung invective at the Egyptian authorities who facilitated the presentation and the Lebanese
artists who presumed to play Egypt back to itself. Part of this panic centered around the show’s central advertisement: a flyer featuring a black and white photograph of the deceased Egyptian King Farouq in brightly-colored photoshop drag – festooned with boa, makeup, and a single pink earring (Figure 1). Anticipating some audience discomfort, in arranging the presentation of the show in Egypt, the director of the Alexandria Opera House suggested that the title be changed from Hishik Bishik Show to Egypt in the 1920s and to remove from the advertisement poster the photoshopped image of the king in drag (the second recommendation was adopted). But commentators wondered anxiously what kind of a difference this effectively made, considering that the offensive poster could still circulate with the show to any other Arab country, presumably even an Arab country known to be unsympathetic to the current Egyptian regime, “like Qatar.” These critics were clearly worried about the circulation of ideas that “all Egypt was like this,” or that playful design and choreography evoking the Egyptian military and Egyptian women belittled Egyptian institutions and its people to the point of insult in the eyes of the Lebanese, the rest of the Arab world, and beyond. How did the disgust and anxiety for these audiences, obviously less enticed by the performed revival, work?

Looking at different kinds of performance practices and circulation of historical memory than Rugg, US performance historian Joseph Roach has suggested that the primary way in which performance engages memory is through “surrogation,” or the supplanting of substitutes in the empty place of what is no longer there. Roach suggests, “performance stands in for an elusive entity that is not but that it must vainly aspire both to embody and replace.” Roach’s model of surrogation and loss emerges as an alternative political interpretation of how performance engages memory. Indeed, it is perhaps in part a felt process of attempted surrogation – Lebanese for Egyptian – that led to the range of discomfort from Egyptian commentators just discussed. The degree and range of Egyptian resentment and opposition to the piece, however, compels a consideration of Hishik Bishik Show’s affective power despite the different emotions it generated. Indeed, the question of possible surrogation forces the question: what, in fact, is lost or missing? And, how could this loss evoke nostalgia for some, panic for others? In other words, what is the referent Jaber and his team revive and how does this revival work?

While they revive a particular musical archive and harken back to a golden age of popular culture, all of the scenes in Hishik Bishik Show also present obvious citations on – or deliberate distortions of – the archive, either sonically in the voices of the performers (an aspect I will return to below) or visually in fantastical juxtaposition. For example, during one scene that flirts with the presentation of a peasant wedding (see cover image), the “bride” first appears perched on a ladder in a gargantuan white dress, which fills most of one side of the stage. Elements typically imagined as inhabiting separate spheres – the whirling dervish, the belly dancer, the bride – cohabitate in close proximity, presenting themselves as malleable ideas rather than as strictly naturalistic characters. Digital projections, evoking a spirit of playfulness, dress the backdrop on both sides of the stage and range from grainy black and white footage, to historical photographs, to photoshopped caricatures of the actors and characters in outer
space, to fantastic, colorful, floating fruit. Like the singer in the opening number, who is first seated in a wheelchair but gets to his feet some minutes later, all of the performers flirt with the limits of what they can represent or what they should do.

What we see and hear on stage is a medley of scenes, costumes, and musical selections, most of which evoke clear historical or cultural referents, but which have been playfully distorted. There is for example, the black and white photograph of the deceased Egyptian King Farouq in brightly-colored photoshop drag just discussed, which also featured as digital projection during the production. Arab audiences will of course recognize the figure of the King’s face while understanding the photoshop drag as a playful citation layered upon it. Other elements are both familiar and strange. The opening song “Cocaine” will be less familiar to most audiences, coming as it does from a less well-known corner of the archive of the work of the famed Egyptian lyricist Sayyed Darwish. The nonsense of the lyrics sets the stage for a political performance positioned at a deliberate arm’s length from the well-known calls to political arms from the Egyptian musician. In a similar move, the pace of the performance’s concluding piece, “Al ‘Ataba Gazaz” [“The Threshold is Glass”], taken from the 1969 Egyptian film of the same name, has been rearranged to affect a trance-like quality, considerably different from the frenzied pace of the original.

Writing about cabaret and vaudeville in inter-war Berlin, German theatre historian Peter Jelavich draws the connection between metropolitan audience formation and the success of cabaret performance in that city. He writes that a “metropolitan psyche,” with a penchant for cynicism and the “tendency to carp at everything great or profound that confronts him [and] drag it down to the level of illusion or fashion,” can explain in large part the popularity of cabaret performances in Berlin. While the parallels between Beirut in the second decade of the twenty-first century and Berlin in the 1920s are few, the tendency of a certain class of Lebanese society to pronounce cultural uniqueness and exception – and the penchant of Beirut musical production to perform an aloofness and a snobbery with pretensions to cosmopolitan exposure – may nonetheless be one trenchant parallel. A social aesthetic embodied in sitting-on-a-balcony-smoking-a-cigarette-while-pronouncing-assessments-of-the-rest-of-the-world has been irritatingly related to me by more than one non-Lebanese interlocutor, and mocked by more than one Lebanese artist. In recently critiquing the aesthetic the indie Egyptian singer Mariam Saleh has adopted accompanying her relocation to Beirut, an Egyptian colleague endearingly qualified it as “that Lebanese shit.” Which is to say that despite obvious differences, the attitude Jelavich writes about as necessary for the success of cabaret in Berlin may apply and, with some modifications underscore, performed cosmopolitan attitudes and notions of Arabness in Beirut.

All of these elements point to the particular aesthetic of revival that Hishik Bishik attempts. As we will see in the next section, the production of nostalgia is not unique to this performance. Nor is revival of music rendered popular across the Arabic-speaking world via the arm of the Egyptian cultural industry particular to the Metro al-Madina theatre. Moreover, the clear citations upon the archive that Hishik Bishik enacts – deliberate, whimsical distortions and not naturalistic
recreations, created by “vamping the archive” or playing it over and back again but not exactly the same each time—inform the overall mood of playful irreverence that the piece performs. Beyond cultural and personal nostalgia (the ability of the piece to connect viewers to their past or to each other via a shared sense belonging), or the prospect of surrogation (in the bodies of Lebanese performers in place of Egyptian ones), these citational strategies evoke the possibility of parody in the aestheticized revival.

If parody is what Hishik Bishik performs, what kind of parody is it? What are the structures of power that it attempts to invert? Clearly what happens in Hishik Bishik Show is not the same kind of satire that fetched The Great Departed international news coverage in their portrayal of leaders of the Islamic State. How does this mode of citation in Hishik Bishik Show, which I have proposed to call “vamping,” work aesthetically and from and to what aesthetic and political traditions does it borrow and belong? In the next section, I juxtapose the strategies of archival revival particular to the cabaret with the strategies used in other mediations of overlapping archives of popular song. This allows me to explore the possibility of a specific kind of parodic representation as camp, i.e., as a series of strategies and tactics relating to exaggerated and affected performance—what Australian performance scholar Moe Meyer calls “queer parody”—operating in Hishik Bishik Show. Leaning on Meyer’s extrapolations of “camp-as-critique,” this works to emphasize strategies particular to the live theatricality of the performance piece while deepening the political context of discussions of “the popular” in Arabic.

**AESTHETICS OF REVIVAL**

“The Lebanese capital city of Beirut has long performed a deliberate straddling of history and a fiercely forward-looking imagination, a kind of “ancient city of the future.” This has manifested itself culturally in different ways. For example, the immediate post-Civil War period (1990s)
saw a resurgence of leisure and consumption exalting both the new and historic glory of the rebuilding city, which were specifically targeted at the Lebanese diaspora, as those who had fled the country during the war returned for holiday with younger generations. In addition to the enthusiasm to be a part (via investment, usually) of Lebanon’s historic rebuilding, this class of consumers was also eager to perform a sense of historic pride about the resilience of the city in different kinds of heritage tourism. A decade later, the immediate aftermath of the uprisings in 2011-2013 saw its own shift in cultural production and leisure consumption that either directly evoked or attempted to play on a kind of pan-Arab nostalgia: from new bars with names evoking the names of famous songs; to a hipsterized surge of interest in vinyl; to a boom in high-end antique markets, including all sorts of refashioned and recycled products; to salon-style musical evenings dedicated to various sorts of turath al-asli [heritage music] including the specific repertoires of Abdel Halim Al-Hafez, Al Sheikh Imam, and Muhammed Abd Al-Wahab. The uprisings and the temporary swell of pride that accompanied them seemed to boost a cultural tendency among Lebanese millennials (in Lebanon and in the diaspora), encouraged by a swell in the diversity of musicians in Lebanon fleeing conflict in Syria, and alongside an increasing number of off-the-beaten-track expats, to explore anew Arabic musical and cultural archives of the twentieth century. Indeed, some of this was nurtured at, and continues to be on display within, the performing repertoire at Metro al-Madina and the playlist of its adjoining bar. Some of this subsided and passed and some has continued or even accelerated into new forms. In the spring of 2018 for example, even the Virgin Megastore at the Beirut airport was selling vinyl records, clearly picking up on a commercial market trading in a kind of nostalgic kitsch flowing through Beirut.

The centrality of nostalgia in the circulation of musical kitsch in and through the Lebanese capital is important in understanding the particular aesthetics of revival that Hishik Bishik Show is able to affect. However, what Hishik Bishik produces diverges from trends in the commercialization of bygone popular culture, what the Scottish cultural studies scholar Andrew Ross has identified as a kind of “maverick orientalism.” That is, Ross distinguishes camp and the parody it is able to enact from kitsch, or, the recirculation of mass produced items as a deliberate and postured counterculture – yesterday’s pop fetishized as today’s hipster-chic. Similarly, Hishik Bishik distinguishes itself from other revivals of popular song in its enactment of a deliberate citation upon the archive – not simply a sampled bricolage of yesteryear.

By reviving performances of songs that were mediated to most audiences as mediatized performances – that is, live performances widely consumed as film, televised concert, or via radio broadcasts during the twentieth century – the cabaret performance at Metro builds a live experience that affords its audiences something most would have never experienced for the original music. This is to recognize, following US performance and media theorist Phillip Auslander, a difference between live performance (what one consumes in a theatre) and mediatized live performance (the recording of a live theatre or concert event disseminated
by television or otherwise). Recognizing a difference allows us to ask: what changes when the medium through which the revived archive is the live relationship between performer and audience as opposed to a screen or recording? What additional forms of citation are available to the performer when the material she revives is mediated through vocal gesture and embedded in choreography that is specifically staged for a live audience?

Indeed, it is worth being explicit. The delight and the disgust that Hishik Bishik Show succeeds in arousing for different audiences lies specifically in the very embodied theatricality of the performance, not its strict fidelity to an historical original. The gestures to recreate for audiences the ambiance of the world of the early to mid-century cabaret notwithstanding, Hishik Bishik Show is far from an attempt at a naturalistic recreation of the scenarios, scenes, or dynamics of either the Egyptian films (themselves fictional) from which many of the songs are drawn or the historical past of cabarets across the region. There is good reason why late-night cabarets (the so-called “super night clubs”) in Beirut, where belly dancing of various kinds is the central attraction, do not produce the same mood or attract the same audiences that flock to see Hishik Bishik. The affective excess produced by Hishik Bishik is not in the dance or the song itself but in the researched, deliberate, and over-aestheticized presentation of a world to which we claim to belong.

The development of a theatrical aesthetic of revival particular to the live cabaret performance is made obvious when we consider that revival of an overlapping archive of Arabic popular song has figured as an important part of pan-Arab entertainment since the early 2000s. Since then, several reality television programs (Arab Idol, Star Academy, etc.) have featured young talents turning to an archive of pan-Arab popular song (much of it Egyptian, because of the modalities of cultural production and dissemination referred to above). In these formats, as Marwan Kraidy has convincingly argued, aspiring young talents from across the region tap into an archive of Arabic song in order to stage nationalistic rivalry: an impressive mobilization indeed of archives of Arab-ness put into the service of national competition. In that context, Kraidy attests that “celebrations of cultural heritage” function as “a social laboratory where various versions of modernity are elaborated and contested.” In performing homage to this shared musical heritage, individual contestants are nonetheless held up as symbols for the Arab nations from which they hail. As viewers vote for their favorites in a competition felt in “real-time,” international rivalries are staged, reified, contested, and consumed as entertainment. Kraidy argues that these mediatized revivals of the archive, “affirm tradition, but within a modern frame.”

While the Hishik Bishik Show tour also sparked responses unique to nationality of the audience for which it played (Lebanon, Tunisia, Egypt, as described above), the political affect of the live cabaret and the contemporary reality television program are quite different.

These differences can be fleshed out by pointing to layers of meaning in variant textures of “the popular.” In Arabic, a host of terms are mobilized to differentiate between these: mahboub (well-liked), shaʿabi (populist, of the people), ‘aami (public, general), jamheeri (public, also used in the sense of mass culture) muntasher (diffuse, widely available), shaʿe’ (well-known), among others. Central to discussions about politics and authenticity in Arabic cultural
production, “popular” is particularly important as a linguistic marker as it evokes a range of material “popularity” (in terms of audience reach) and a diverse repertoire of affective referents to the “people,” thereby mediating meanings and stakes in different contexts. It has been used to make specific a political reading of the relationship between intellectuals, politicians, and the so-called “Arab street,” emphasizing the populist tones of the words shaʿabi and shaʿab.40 It has been used to elaborate considerations of nationalism. In contradistinction, it has also been mobilized in discussions of vulgarity and low-brow consumption.41 It has been used to meditate on nostalgia and authenticity.42 Much of this has also been gendered, with performances of femininity determining qualifications of both high and low culture and authenticity as well as inauthenticity. Without differentiating between these different economies of popularity, a designation of reviving or celebrating “popular culture” risks confusing referents and collapsing diverse affects and habitus.

For its format and genre, the independent theatrical production Hishik Bishik Show has also proven relatively “popular” (well-liked). While it touches an archive of well-known, widely-available, and in some cases shaʿabi music, with its ticket price of 20,000 LL (about 13 USD) it is relatively affordable but still not accessible family entertainment for most Lebanese outside of downtown (Ras) Beirut. So, while it might be the most successful and popular musical revue of the last several decades, its reach (“popularity”) still pales to other forms of sung revival – like the reality television programs. This should help qualify the aesthetics of citation in live performance that I argue are being developed here: while they play with a popular archive and have seemingly wide appeal, Hishik Bishik Show and other revivals at Metro are still pointedly avant-garde in style and tone. Aesthetically, the cabaret produces something the television program cannot (and vice-versa). The aesthetic gesture that Hishik Bishik Show builds is not only a carefully researched and then specially selected sampling archive of popular Arabic song from the twentieth century. In these performances one can also discern the development of an aesthetic gesture unique to this live cabaret performance that is performed on top of archival revival. This gesture produces something in its own right.

THE POLITICS OF CUTE

You don’t see specific politics, but you can feel it.
HISHAM JABER

As mentioned above, discourses of “the popular” vis-à-vis Arabic cultural production often trade in nostalgia and tropes of authenticity. Accusations of vulgarity and “low brow” culture alternate with assessments of populism, state-sanctioned cultural production, and celebrations of high culture. For example, as US anthropologist Walter Armbrust has convincingly shown, mass cultural production is often seen as vulgar or lowbrow when compared to a more sophisticated, or state-sanctioned high culture. Armbrust rightly takes care to note that the
aspect of time is also important: the mass culture and the low culture of years past often transforms into the treasured cultural production of the present. For example, Edward Said’s homage to Tahia Carioca, the famous Cairene belly dancer, underscores how nostalgia for the “low” culture of yesterday can gradually morph into the high culture of today. This affective aspect of revival is significant for my conversation here because the archive of songs that Hishik Bishik revives is deliberately selected from an archive of “sha’abi” or “low” culture – music that was widely distributed through popular film and that is distinct from the sanctioned state culture of the famous Egyptian diva Um Kulthoum for example. (Hishik Bishik Show deliberately does not revive an archive of well-known and “highbrow” music.) At the same time, in reviving this “popular” sha’abi, mass-produced material, the stuff of films, neither does Hishik Bishik Show attempt to propel the once popular music into the status of high culture. Instead, Hishik Bishik camps the archive of popular song. This is to say, it revives the material with a particular aesthetic – asking the audience to keep one eye and one ear on the original, and to train one eye and one ear on the citation they layer on top of it.

Camp is an aesthetic, or a sensibility, as US literary and film critic Susan Sontag has put it, suspended between sincerity and seriousness. Sontag writes,

The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to ‘the serious,’ One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious. One is drawn to Camp when one realizes that ‘sincerity’ is not enough.

Sontag has been decried for her assessment of camp as a sensibility, accused by her detractors of rendering it apolitical or aesthete, and of stripping the “queer parody” inherent to camp of its political redress. But in a post-uprisings landscape, the declaration that “sincerity is not enough” is itself potent political commentary on the current state of politics in the region. The boredom with the announcement of revolution identified at the beginning of this CARGC Paper begging precisely a “more complex” relationship to political processes. Mirroring our own fatigue, the journalist’s skepticism signals that the eager musician’s sincerity, however well-meaning, is not enough.

Play with sincerity and seriousness is a constant tension throughout Hishik Bishik Show. While camp elements can be found in the scenery and costuming (in photoshopped projections and exaggerated outfits, as described above), the aesthetic citation I am identifying as decisive in this performance turns on the strong performance by the lead female singer, Yasmina Fayyed. The citation Fayyed layers into her performance is centered on her reenactment not only of popular songs but of popular performances by well-known divas of twentieth-century Egyptian popular song. Fayyed’s big numbers in Hishik Bishik Show, songs like “Mashrabsh a-shai” [“I Don’t Drink Tea,” discussed below], “Ou’ah Tikalemni” [“Don’t Talk to Me”] “Sona ya sonson” [“Sona, oh Sonson”]; and “Khali yatjawaz ya bahia” [“Let Him Get Married, Auntie”] are pieces whose original performances by female singers became popular just as much for the music as for the star’s “performance about the performance of [gender] roles.” For example, “Ou’ah Tikalemni” [“Don’t Talk to Me”], popularized by Aziza El-Masriyah, toys with a suitor,
warning him not to talk to her now as her father is nearby. “Khali yatjawaz ya bahia” [“Let Him Get Married, Auntie”], popularized by Leila Nazmy, addresses a potential mother in law (or other, female figure of familial authority), endearing her to let her son marry as a provocation to the singer’s potential rivals. The refrain runs: “khali yatjawaz ya bahia wa rah shouf ana wila hiyeh” [“let him get married and let’s see who it’ll be – me or her!”]. This song in particular pokes comically at inter-feminine rivalry staged around beauty standards. “Sona ya sonson,” popularized by Shadia, stages a young girl coming from school going to meet her boyfriend. Like the others (and especially as in “I Don’t Drink Tea,” discussed at length below), the song stages a deliberate performance of girlish cuteness that is nonetheless performed by a grown woman. In this selection of musical choices – a process which Fayyed herself led – Hishik Bishik not only revives an archive of song but deliberately samples and reenacts musical performances of gender that are inherently self-aware.

At the center of the performances in Hishik Bishik is thus a deliberately tongue-in-cheek reenactment of the self-presentation of popular stars and the ways in which they related themselves to their audiences during these iconic acts. The extremely self-aware parody that Hishik Bishik attempts is here. Unlike the nostalgic discourses that Said conjures in his assessment of the charm of the famous dancer Tahia or the binary discussions between high and low culture that Armbrust’s interlocutors enforce in their discussions of the “meaninglessness” of mass produced pop music in Egypt, Hishik Bishik is essentially not interested in either authenticity or nostalgia. In other words, the parody Hishik Bishik succeeds in offering is not of Egypt or its symbols of power (the King, the peasantry, or the army, I return to this below). Rather, the parody lies specifically in a camped revival of the diva’s performance – and this parody centrally interpolates the contemporary viewer as much as it gestures towards the original. To illuminate how this works, in what follows I offer a close reading of Fayyed’s performance of one of the songs in Hishik Bishik Show by comparing it to the original and to other revivals of it.

“Mashrabsh a-shai” [“I Don’t Drink Tea”] is a song popularized by the Egyptian singer Leila Nazmy in 1970. The song has been invoked or remade repeatedly since Nazmy first sang it and Yasmine Fayyed performs it in Hishik Bishik Show. It features prominently in the second act as an important part of the show’s energetic climax. Nazmy’s original song is a playful response to a suitor articulated by a young woman. The refrain “mashrabsh a-shai, ashrab Azouza ana,” or, I don’t drink tea, I drink soda pop” is her response to a gentleman suitor who offers her tea, which she refuses for the more playful Azouza, a sweet, fizzy soda. The lyrics continue with offers of umbrellas, fans, fruit, all of which she accepts and offers back to him. But the tea – traditional, old fashioned – she refuses. The song thus stages a confident young woman who is desirable in her stubborn naiveté and modern in her preferences.
Obvious in the archival recording of live concerts of Nazmy singing the song is desexualized flirtation. Nazmy is feminine, cute, girly. Video clips like this one show her affecting this feminine cuteness in an elaborate cupcake dress, synched at the waist with flowing ruffles to the floor, bare shoulders except for elaborate dress straps that mirror the floral brocade in her hair and the corsage on her wrist. The costume and her mannerisms accentuate her performance of cute, girlish charm in the coy refusals she sings.

Of course, “cuteness” has long been associated with commodity consumption, an aspect that is certainly also present in Nazmy’s song as she asserts her modern confidence in preferences for the commercial beverage. Recent literature has sought to read in the aesthetics of cuteness a relationship of power. For example, leaning on Marx’s explanation of commodity fetishism, US cultural theorist Sianne Ngai proposes that, “cuteness revolves around the fantasy of a commodity addressing its ‘guardian.’”50 That is, for Ngai, “cute” is important for how it makes manifest the relationship of power: cuteness is “an aestheticization of powerlessness.” Read in this way, Nazmy’s feminine demureness, her “cuteness,” is staged as coy refusal, endearing herself to the suitor with a flirtation that aligns the modern woman with commodity consumption (soda pop) and remains bound up in the courting ritual. For the listening audience, the power differential between tradition and modernity, between older suitor and younger woman is aestheticized and rendered desirable as Nazmy models a confident demureness fit for the modern woman.

If cuteness makes manifest relationships of power, is that why Hishik Bishik’s turn to archival material like Nazmy’s song succeeded in producing the strong but divergent affective responses that it did?51 We can imagine how making Egypt “cute” could provoke anxiety about respect for a range of symbols from the state, to the peasantry, to women, and cultural industries.

A primary part of Nazmy’s performance of the song, however, is staged not in her appearance or in the lyrical refusal and assertion of commodity preferences (soda for tea) but in her voice. When she sings the second part of the refrain “ashrab Azouza ana” (“I drink soda”), she
repeatedly manipulates her voice into a kind of sing-song or baby talk, staging an obvious, girlish pout. This effects what in Arabic is called *dala’*, or, *acting cute*. *Dala’* refers to the act of endearing oneself, of making oneself cute, and of being thus charmed or seduced by cuteness. It is important here in that it draws attention to the relationships built in the process of acting or becoming cute, which often falls out of connotations in English of a thing that is “cute.”

Different from being cute, and especially as highlighted in the performance of acting cute that Nazmy effects in this song, the *dala’* act draws our attention to other configurations of power. Indeed, unlike cute, *dala’* doesn’t exist without the observation of this slide up to the mark. Something that is cute either is cute, or it isn’t. On the other hand, built into the notion of *dala’* is the recognition of becoming cute. Acting cute, playing cute, and pretending cuteness and the pleasure in watching this act are quite different. We might compare the Arabic exclamations, *ma ahlaa!* [how lovely is that thing!] and *ma ahla a-dala’!* [how lovely it is to be charmed, to be watching someone charming/ attempt to charm!]. Recognizing *dala’* means recognizing pleasure in the very working of charm and the power of seduction. In the original, Nazmy is clearly playing with being cute and part of the charm in the performance is watching Nazmy be charming by acting cute in her stubborn, girlish assertion of preferences.

Read in this way, Nazmy’s performance when she sings “I don’t drink tea, I drink soda,” is a much more complicated performance of power relations. Not an “aestheticization of powerlessness,” it precisely draws attention to the ways in which the performer of *dala’* and the viewer are both implicated and imbricated in power dynamics by cheekily performing awareness of them. *Ma ahla a-dala’!* [how lovely it is to be charmed!] thus refers to a direct acknowledgement of the pleasure in the power of the charmer or seduction – and this holds whether the statement is offered earnestly as someone worked over by said charm, or sarcastically as one who watches the charm worked out on another.52 Considering the enactment of *dala’* forces a recognition of the theatricality involved in performing cuteness, a theatricality that is important in my discussion here because it demands precisely that spectators recognize they are watching an act. Herein lies the potential for parody in the camp aesthetic effected in Hishik Bishik Show. Across the range of scholarship on camp, self-conscious perception of the act – a “knowingness” on behalf of the viewer – is central for it to work.53 As US gender and queer studies scholar Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick argued, camp is “generous because it acknowledges that its perceptions are necessarily also creations.”54 It is precisely this generosity that allows the production of affective excess capable of producing a range of emotional responses to this production. *Hishik Bishik Show* also demands this “knowingness” from its audiences.

To understand how this works in Hishik Bishik, it is worth comparing two other recent mediations of Nazmy’s original. These other revivals – in mass-produced pop music and indie rock – do not attempt to recreate the *dala’* act. As a result, their revival produces a significantly different affective texture than Fayyed’s performances in *Hishik Bishik Show*. For example, in the early 2000s, the Lebanese pop star Marwa adapted Nazmy’s hit.55 In line with the aesthetics of millennial commercial pop music widespread across the region, in Marwa’s rendition, the
flirtation in “I don’t drink tea, I drink soda” is taken literally, stripping the girlish innocence from the flip in Nazmy’s baby talk and replacing it with the monotonous, plastic sex of commercialized pop. In a typical whirlwind of fantastical scenes, from an Orientalized harem to Marilyn Monroe in the rain, the breathy near-moaning in Marwa’s voice deliberately replaces Nazmy’s acting cute with sexy poses. This is an effect that relies in part on the audience knowing the original and on seeing the difference between Nazmy’s coy dalâ‘ [acting cute] and Marwa’s shameless posing. Part of the break with the past that is obviously envisioned as the piece’s newness depends on the distance Marwa is able to effect between her own commanding sexual performance and the demureness of her predecessor. As such, Marwa doesn’t slide in and out of cute or sexy, it is a constant note throughout. The charm of watching the singer use charm to slide up to and away from the mark is gone: there is no dalâ‘ act.


Indeed it is perhaps Marwa’s commercial rendition that led Hamed Sinno, the lead singer and lyricist for the Lebanese indie band Mashrou’ Leila, to declare repeatedly in the chorus of their 2015 track, “Djin,” that “mashrabsh a-shai, mashrabsh Azouza” [“I don’t drink tea and I don’t drink soda, either”].56 In this original refrain, which also relies on audience familiarity with both musical predecessors, Sinno seems to pronounce an emo refusal of the classically popular (Nazmy) and the contemporary, commercial popular (Marwa), while distancing himself from both. Sinno’s refusal of both the classic pop and the soda pop stages his own serious flirtation. While Nazmy’s refusal of tea for soda can be read as a girlish assertion of her modernity and Marwa’s version read as a refusal of demure femininity for overt sexuality, Sinno’s refusal of both performances of modernity is his indie assertion of his own alternative in an Arab mediascape dominated by commercial aesthetics. To effect this refusal, Sinno’s reading, like Marwa’s, is constant: he does not slip in and out of the seduction the ballad performs.
It is in the context of this range of mediated revivals of Nazmy’s hit that Hishik Bishik Show’s approach to the same original song is interesting. Unlike Marwa or Sinno, who ignore or overlook the performative aspect of *dala‘* in Nazmy’s original, Hishik Bishik Show centers this performative dynamic. Not simply reviving the song, Fayyed’s performance elaborates a citation on Nazmy’s *performance* of the song. As such, Fayyed confidently embraces the cuteness of the fizzy soda, rescuing it from the lewd video clip of Marwa’s dance number without stubbornly declaring, “I don’t drink tea and I don’t drink soda either.” In a way she says, ‘yes’ and ‘no’ to history of the popular and popular Arabic music and in so doing reinterprets and remakes what the political in popular imaginary around this music might mean. In Hishik Bishik, Fayyed’s rendition of “Mashrabsh a-shai,” is not, like Marwa’s, a replacement of cute with sex. Nor does it declare, like Sinno, that we “should not” drink tea (tradition) or soda (mass culture) neither. Fayyed and Hishik Bishik do not perform refusal, rupture, or break. Rather, like Nazmy, Fayyed reintroduces the element of *dala‘* and entreats Hishik Bishik’s audience to watch her slide up to and away from a mark.
Notice at the end of the clip of the Hishik Bishik rendition of the song, how the singer Fayyed deliberately exaggerates the pretended affect in Nazmy’s original. Fayyed performs here an exaggerated *dala’* to tease Nazmy’s original recording. Hishik Bishik audiences know Fayyed is playing it up – in fact *playing up the playing up*. With her voice, she enacts a citation upon the original, exaggerating the way in which Nazmy played with flirtation, how she was pretending cuteness [*keef kanat ‘am tetdala’*] and thus drawing attention to the *dala’* act. In *Hishik Bishik*, we are not entreated to distance ourselves from Nazmy’s original. But neither are we watching a naturalistic reenactment of it. Rather, we are watching Fayyed draw attention to how Nazmy succeeded in playing cute. The effect of this is not only a revival of the song, but a theatricalization of the affect associated with it. The delight in watching this revival is thus double: in a sense we are invited to watch ourselves watching a *dala’* act.

Herein lies the essence of the aesthetic citation that *Hishik Bishik* perfects. Instead of the aestheticization of powerlessness in a rendering cute of Egypt, its people, its leaders, or its cultural institutions, Fayyed and the other performers draw attention to the power of the *dala’* act under whose charm the interpolated viewer recognizes herself. There is thus less an opportunity for surrogation (in Roach’s sense of supplanting loss in performance), and more an invitation to acknowledge the production of power, the reality of seductive charm, and the pleasure in relinquishing to both. As Moe Meyer writes, “camp is a strategy that marks ontology as a cultural process subject to intervention.” In effecting this camped revival, *Hishik Bishik* marks our ways of knowing – of belonging and identifying via a shared cultural repertoire – as cultural processes that are subject to intervention. There is nothing stable about what we know and recognize as shared culture, and the latter is open to invention, intervention, and distortion.

In effecting this camped revival, *Hishik Bishik* marks our ways of knowing – of belonging and identifying via a shared cultural repertoire – as cultural processes that are subject to intervention. There is nothing stable about what we know and recognize as shared culture, and the latter is open to invention, intervention, and distortion. This continues to be a provocative suggestion, all the more so because of the comfortable nostalgia in which this citational distortion is couched for so many of the show’s audiences. *Hishik Bishik* succeeds in a very particular cultural mediation: at once comforting in the staging of, while inviting an interrogation of, the pleasure in cultural identity, referents, and belonging. It is thus that the show also succeeds in producing considerable anxiety, as well.
VAMPIRING THE ARCHIVE: APPROACHING AESTHETICS IN GLOBAL MEDIA

Every performance enacts a theory
DIANA TAYLOR

In this CARGC Paper, I attempted to explore an aesthetic of revival particular to a sequence of successful live musical performances in Beirut. I began this exploration by identifying and distinguishing my approach from attention to the aesthetics of protest or of rupture found in assessments of cultural production across the Arab world. This built on the work of Jessica Winegar and the British art historian Claire Bishop in identifying the epistemological and political biases built into celebrations of agency in certain geographic locales. At the same time, my attention here was inflected by the overwhelming political and human loss that has followed the brief window of the uprisings across much of the Arab world. This paper expressed my interest in finding an approach to the politics and aesthetics of cultural production that refuses to reify the expectation of art practice to perform resistance while recalibrating the political role of cultural production in especially bleak contexts.

Towards this twinned end, I proposed vamping the archive as a phrase to cohere the embodied and performative techniques by which the creative team behind Hishik Bishik Show approach an archive of popular Arabic song. In working to understand how this show has been able to provoke a spectrum of emotions and affects, I contrasted the aesthetic choices of this cabaret performance with turns to similar archives of Arabic song in otherwise mediated performances (like the commercial music clips of the pop star Marwa, the pan-Arab reality television competitions like Arab Idol, and the indie rock band Mashrou’ Leila). In doing so, I suggested that what distinguishes Hishik Bishik is a particular aesthetic of revival. This latter emerges in the gaps and overlaps between different materiality and affective texture of nostalgia and “the popular” in Arab musical production. Hishik Bishik Show at Metro al-Madina is distinguished aesthetically and in terms of political economy of its production from other turns to overlapping archives of popular song. Leaning on Sianne Ngai’s elaborations of aesthetic categories, I explored the political implications the specification the performance of dala’ (or the act of acting cute) might offer elaborations of power and powerlessness in discussions of aesthetics of “cuteness.”

My ambivalence about the framework of resistance in discussions of politics in Arab cultural production is a product of skepticism about efficiency or political causality in the reception of artistic work. At the same time, my insistence on the politics of representation has stemmed from an awareness that across “area studies,” discussion of the particularity of “local” audiences has often meant distinguishing these audiences from a so-called universal (usually “western”) model. Paradoxically, in order to make a case for specificity and difference, accounts of Middle East and other “area” cultural production have often flattened difference within specific contexts in order to highlight the particularity of the dynamics addressed. This has meant that...
differences within local audiences have often received short shrift and that contrasting social aesthetics for a single artwork or production are often overlooked.62 I have insisted instead on a comparative, intra-regional discussion of audiences, following productions in different national contexts within the “Arab world.” This gesture is situated in the opportunity global media studies offers to connect, provoke, or move beyond the “area” studies model for the study of non-western cultures.63 At the same time, I suggested that an interdisciplinary assessment of how nostalgia and popularity is mediated across forms of cultural production illuminates the particular aesthetic of revival at play here.

The deliberate flirtation with a range of shared symbols and signifiers in Hishik Bishik Show encourages its audiences to reconsider the placeholders by which belonging, identity, politics, heritage, history, and normalcy are imagined. As we have seen, this provoked nostalgia and wistfulness among some audiences, and anxiety and suspicion among others. Across the range of these emotive responses, however, the performance arouses in its ability to call attention to flirtation and pleasure itself. This compels the audience to acknowledge that it is playfully peeking at a made-up representation of culture and history – and not that they are witnessing an objective reflection of who they are, where they come from, or how they should feel about either. An aesthetic of flirtation and citation, specifically of calling attention to dala’ [acting cute] and thus recognizing the processes of being endeared, charmed, or seduced is different from convincing an audience of coherence, justice, or fortitude. This aesthetic gesture is distinct, affectively and politically, from announcing a condition of newness in which the audience should find itself.

Working from this refusal of objective representation as a technique of production in live performance, I have suggested here that a methodology of reading the political and the aesthetic in global media might also be understood as a process of “vamping the archive.”

What if, instead of the defining the “where” of our subjects of study, the “global” in global media studies referred instead to the “how” – specifically, to a way of situating the researcher vis-à-vis the archive and the repertoire to which she turns?
a question of the language of my presentation. Rather, it has sought to trouble the bounds of the familiar binaries – global/ local/ transnational/ national/ globalized/ traditional and so on – by prioritizing a process of engagement (in Arabic) over a qualifier (Arab). In so doing, I have in mind the need to de-essentialize the study of culture produced and consumed in Arab-majority societies and the desire to introduce the salience of specific Arabic terminology to the analysis and study of cultural production.

Throughout, my insistence on intimacy and subjectivity in a discussion of aesthetics and politics takes inspiration from but at the same time lands at a different angle than recent calls to mimic the behavior of online engagement in imagining ethnography and reception as “hacking,” “lurking,” “bootlegging,” or “sampling.” With its deliberate emphasis on the live, the embodied, the repetitive, the misfire, the rehearsal, and the flirtatious, vamping the archive argues for an approach to ethnography, analysis, politics, and aesthetics in global media that avoids the seductive claims of rupture while it meditates on longing, obsession, and the desire to replay what cannot be let go. It has come from my own attempts to make space for delight in a world that increasingly has little use for it.
NOTES

1. I am indebted to Marwan Kraidy, Marina Krikorian, Samira Rajabi, Rima Najdi, and Sara Mourad for their careful and generous feedback on drafts of this paper. Additional appreciation is due to Yakein Abdelmagid, Farha Ghannam, Dominika Laster, Aniko Szucs, Zeina Halabi, Catherine Young, Donatella Galella, and Stefanie A. Jones for their suggestions and reflections. Roy Dib and Hisham Jaber were generous in sharing their time and perspectives with me. In this research as in other work, my parents have been patient and supportive companions and advisors. Shortcomings remain entirely my own. In transliteration of Arabic I have followed a simplified transliteration schema which follows the guide of the International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies but leaves off the diacritics. Translations are mine unless noted otherwise.


9. Much ethnographic literature that celebrates the performance of rupture or resistance in cultural production fails to articulate the thing resisted or ruptured from. This is what, in my view, makes this enthusiasm for resistance, rupture, or break problematic. I am hardly the first to find the celebration of resistance as critical framework across the humanities problematic. In a compelling passage in her groundbreaking For Space, the late British geographer Doreen Massey leans on the US cultural studies scholar Kristin Ross when the latter asks, but “resistance
to what?” Ross and Massey’s question points to the problematic depoliticization of cultural
production I am identifying here and that I seek, in this work and elsewhere, to write against.
(See Doreen Massey, *For Space* [London: SAGE, 2004], 46-47.

10. Interview with the author, 2013.


12. On the golden age of Egyptian cinema and song, see for example, Sherif Boraie, *The
Golden Years of Egyptian Film Cinema*, Cairo 1936-1967 (Cairo: The American University in
Cairo Press, 2008); and Virginia Danielson, *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song,
and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century*, especially Chapter Five (Chicago: University of
Chicago Press, 1997); Walter Armbrust, “The Golden Age before the Golden Age,” in *Mass
Mediations: New Approaches to Popular Culture in the Middle East*, 292-328 (Berkeley:
University of California Press, 2000), among others.

13. In imagining the benefits of intraregional and transregional scholarship, indeed in exploring
the contours of what both intraregional and transregional might mean, I have in mind a range
of compelling research on the so-called Atlantic or Pacific “Rims,” and on the “Black Atlantic,”
like Paul Gilroy’s, *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA:
Harvard University Press, 1993); I am also thinking of scholarship on movement and trade that
underscores the interconnectedness of ideas about belonging and difference, like for example
I also have in mind scholarship on the economic development of the Arab world that links
local processes to international trends like Koenraad Bogaert’s *Globalized Authoritarianism:
Megaprojects, Slums, and Class Relations in Urban Morocco* (Minneapolis: University of
Minnesota Press, 2018) and Ahmad Kanna’s *Dubai: The City as Corporation* (Minneapolis:
University of Minnesota Press, 2011). While I don’t really work this way here, new efforts in
cross-regional research connecting the Arab world and the wider Middle East with other “area
studies” are encouraging. See for example, Alejandro Velasco, et al., eds., “The Latin East: New
Perspectives on Latin America-Middle East Ties,” special report of the NACLA Report on the
Americas 50 (2018). Finally, I am also thinking about scholarship that traces a central aspect
in performance across different locales, like Diana Taylor’s *The Archive and the Repertoire:
Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003) and
Maurya Wickstrom’s, *Performance in the Blackades of Neoliberalism: Thinking the Political

14. My privileging of intermediality here builds from a range of scholarship coming out of
theatre and performance studies that works to understand the incorporation of media into
performance practice, addressing multi-media performance and its interpolation of audiences,
as well as new uses of public space in this interdisciplinary art practice by using tools from
a range of overlapping disciplines. See for example, Sarah Bay-Cheung, Chiel Kattenbelt,
and Andy Lavender, eds., *Mapping Intermediality in Performance* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam
University Press, 2011); Meiling Cheng and Gabrielle H. Cody, *Reading Contemporary
Performance: Theatricality Across Genres* (New York: Routledge, 2015); and Khalid Amine and
George F. Roberson, eds., *Intermediality, Performance, and the Public Sphere* (Collaborative

16. Edward Said wrote in his foundational *Orientalism* that, in her writing and speech, the Orientalist seeks to relay exteriority to the Orient. That is, the researcher might invest in maintaining a certain distance from her subject of study. The “principle product of this exteriority,” Said wrote, is representation. “What he says and writes, by virtue of the fact that it is said and written is meant to indicate that the Orientalist is outside of the Orient, both as an existential and as a moral act. The principle product of this exteriority is of course representation” (Edward Said, *Orientalism* [New York: Penguin, 1977], 21).


20. Rugg, 46.


23. In Lebanon, unsurprisingly, the specificity of the Lebanese element dropped out of the evocations of nostalgia and fun the piece promises to provide.

25. Shaheera el-Najjar, “Masr ‘Hishik Bishik’ wa malekha yertada el-haleq wa yeda’ el-rouj wa niswa’ ha ‘saqatat’” [“Egypt ‘Dances’ and Her King Wears Earrings and Rouge and her Women Have ‘Fallen’”] (in Arabic), ElFagr.com, October 9, 2015, accessed December 15, 2017, http://www.elfagr.com/1887312. The photoshopped image also appears in the play itself, as part of the digital projections that act as stage scenery. Qatar was vocally supportive of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood’s rise to power immediately following the January 25, 2011 revolution and the MB candidate who won popular elections in June 2012, Mohamed Morsi. After the coup, which deposed Morsi, imprisoned him, executed hundreds of his followers, and brought former Field Marshal Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to power in July 2013, Qatar was critical of the new regime. The anxiety expressed by media commentators that the poster would circulate “in Qatar” in particular relates these contemporary political dynamics.


28. Peter Jelavich, Berlin Cabaret (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 32. I am indebted to Catherine Young for this reference and to Aaron Shapiro for the suggestion to consider a parallel with German cabaret culture.


30. Craig Larkin, Memory and Conflict in Lebanon: Remembering and Forgetting the Past (New York: Routledge, 2015).

31. I am thinking of the pub Li Beirut on Makdisi Street in Hamra District, which takes its name from the Fairouz song of the same name and which offers clients a Fairouz and Rahbani-themed happy hour.


33. Many of these (like the salon style concerts of ‘Abd al-Kareem a-She’ar singing Abd al-Wahab and Abd al-Halim Hafez and Sandy Chamoun singing Al-Sheikh Imam) are also staged at Metro, whose artistic team has experimented with a range of revival musical performances. Moreover, following the success of Hishik Bishik Show, the artistic team also presented Bar Farouk, similar in format to Hishik Bishik as a musical cabaret or revue, but drawing its repertoire from an archive of Lebanese, as opposed to Egyptian, popular song. Through the 2017-2018 winter, Metro hosted Mahrajant a-Sha’ab, a remake of a Metro cabaret performance. The Great Popular Festival: Hiz ya Wiz (or, “hiz ya wiz” being more or less synonymous with the phrase hishik bishik) and the Egyptian indie singer Mariam Saleh sang selections from the work of Ahmad ‘Adawiyeh, the giant of Egyptian popular song of the 1980s.

34. I thank Sara Mourad for this observation about the role of music curation at the Metro Bar. See also the previous note.


38. Kraidy, 12 and 18, respectively.


41. See Armbrust, Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt, 165-220.


43. Armbrust, Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt.


46. Ross, No Respect, 160, original emphasis.

47. Interview with Roy Dib, March 2018.

48. See note 51.


51. Indeed, Hishik Bishik’s turn to Nazmy’s performance could be read as a commentary on power. As Halabi writes, the Egyptian media responses around the photoshopped image of the King Farouq display an anxiety about the sanctity of symbols of power. She points to the figure of the “judge, the critic, the policeman, the captain,” behind the distorted avatar of the former king who are threatened by the image of authority “disgraced.” This disgracing of authority is less legible outside of the Egyptian context as evidenced in the delighted responses of both Lebanese and Tunisian audiences (Halabi, “Whose Picture Is This?”).

52. Herein lies of course a whole set of gendered notions about dissembling flirtation and the inconstancy of women and children and the susceptibility of fathers and suitors to them which I unfortunately do not have adequate space to critique here.


REFERENCES


MEDIA


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